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Biafra

The West African country of Nigeria has been undergoing a civil war for the past 18 months and there are no signs of an early end to the fighting. The war began when the eastern part of Nigeria seceded, calling itself Biafra. The Biafrans, who are predominantly members of the Ibo tribe, are convinced that the federal Nigerian authorities intend to exterminate them as a tribe, and they appear to be willing to starve to death rather than renounce their secession.

As a result of the war, a serious refugee problem has arisen in Biafra. As the federal troops advanced into the secessionist territory, the Ibos retreated, and today approximately 7 million people are crammed into Biafra which is only about one-quarter of what it was when the secession was declared. Starvation is a major problem in Biafra and will probably get worse within the next few months unless more relief aid is sent. Many recent estimates of the rate of starvation, however, have been greatly exaggerated, and the problem could probably be solved within a reasonable period of time if the war would end.

There are several international relief agencies now aiding Biafra, including the International Committee

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of the Red Cross and several religious organizations, but these agencies are facing numerous problems. Biafra now has no sea ports and all supplies must be airlifted into its one airstrip. The US and UK have for some time been urging that relief be moved to the Biafrans over ground routes, but the Ibos fear that federal forces would use these routes for military purposes. The federal authorities are suspicious that the agencies flying relief to the Biafrans may also be transporting arms, and have therefore not given whole-hearted support to the present relief effort. It would seem that some type of land relief routes will have to be worked out if the problem is to be dealt with satisfactorily.

The Nigerian Government, which like all new countries is very sensitive of its sovereignty, has been suspicious of the US role in Nigeria, mainly because the US has worked to aid the refugees. At the same time, the USSR has been building a reputation of Nigeria's friend in need by supplying military assistance to the Nigerians. The Nigerians have strong ties with the West, however, particularly with the UK, and it seems unlikely at this point that they will break these ties, and establish closer relations with the Soviet Union.

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The civil war itself has been a stalemate since last September, and it does not appear that either side will score any major military victories within the near future. The Biafrans have been able to hold off the much larger Federal Forces mainly because the French have been supplying arms to the secessionists. The Biafrans also receive some military support from the four African countries that have recognized Biafra. Should this stalemate continue, the Nigerians may well become more suspicious of the US, while at the same time the Soviets will be given more opportunities to supply arms to the Nigerians and to try and increase USSR presence and influence there.

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